



*Sheppard  
Pratt*

# *The Frontline Supervisor*

*Helping You Manage Your Company's  
Most Valuable Resource - Employees*

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◆ My employee would be an outstanding worker, except he has begun performing his duties too slowly. He says he has a medical condition and wants permission to work more slowly than other employees do. I cannot honor this request. Is this an EAP matter?

If your employee's inability to work quickly is due to a short-term illness, then taking sick leave or uncompensated leave would be appropriate. However, if the condition is not temporary, and working quickly is essential in performing the job, the issue is appropriate for EAP referral. The EAP will interview your employee for a complete understanding of his medical condition or any other issues that contribute to his difficulty. This might entail speaking with his health care provider. Ultimately, it will be important for your employee to provide a written request of how he wants the organization to accommodate him (i.e., more time to do his work). Your organization can then decide whether it can make these accommodations. You should keep the next level of management and/or your human resources advisor apprised of this matter because it may threaten his job security if his requests cannot be met.

◆ I am making a supervisor referral of my employee to the EAP for performance problems. A rumor exists that he has a drinking problem. I have nothing to support such concerns. Should I mention this rumor to the EA professional?

You should inform the EA professional that a rumor exists about an alcohol problem, but that you have no performance observations to support it. Remember, however, rumors have no place in your documentation or corrective interview when you make the supervisor referral. The EA professional will interview your employee about the performance issues to determine whether a personal problem exists. Such an interview routinely considers the possibility of an alcohol or other drug problem. The EA professional will not confront your employee with the rumor, but like any diagnostician, may consider more closely whether the employee suffers from the symptoms of alcoholism. Frequently, such rumors are without merit, but sharing what you have heard is appropriate and can be helpful.

◆ Within our work group there is often an atmosphere that outsiders might consider sexual harassment. Still, no employees have ever complained. Should I not worry, or should I take steps to stop such behavior.

A lack of complaints about sexual harassment is not a reason for not stopping this behavior. Sexual harassment has been legally defined and there is a huge employment practice liability for companies that do not intervene to stop it. Indeed, the U.S. Supreme Court has made at least three rulings on sexual harassment in the past four years. Some employees may suffer the effects of sexual harassment and not complain about it until motivated by adverse changes in the employment relationship. For example, if an employee is terminated, only then might a legitimate sexual harassment complaint emerge. Claiming that no one complained may be worth little if you condoned such behavior. Remember, as well, that you could be at personal risk in a suit because of your failure to stop such behavior. Even if a lawsuit by an employee were not successful, it would be expensive, extremely stressful, and time consuming to defend against.

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◆ My employee blames his poor attendance on problems with a relationship at home. I've been patient, but baffled. I can't see the connection between such a problem and coming in late.

A desire to be supportive and understanding of employees may lead some supervisors to accept almost any apparently sincere reason for performance shortcomings of an otherwise valuable employee. Unfortunately, many employees, in an effort to gain understanding and patience from the supervisor, may not report the true severity of a personal problem perceived as socially stigmatizing. This does not mean that the employee isn't making attempts to resolve the true problem, but solutions may not be within easy reach. Severe behavioral medical problems such as depression or addiction are not "do-it-yourself" situations. It is easy for a supervisor to become entangled in aspects of the personal problem and its anticipated resolution, even during a period of unacceptably substandard performance. Decide to refer your employee to the EAP on the basis of the continuing performance problem. Try to detach yourself from the personal issues and your efforts to comprehend them.

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◆ An employee was dismissed for good reasons, but a severe reaction toward management has now emerged among coworkers. Information justifying the management decision can't be shared, but what can we say to improve morale? Should we hold a group meeting?

Presumably, the morale problem you face is fueled by doubt about the legitimacy of the management action taken to dismiss your employee. Employees' attitudes change as they cease to have doubts or tire of the negativity. To facilitate this process, you do not have to disclose confidential information supporting your decision. Instead, expect employees to act appropriately and be productive despite management's decision. You could communicate this expectation in a group or during a staff meeting, but further discussion should be limited. Reinforce this message to employees individually as the need arises. Consider asking for an explanation for any employee's problematic behavior in such meetings. Assert the inability of management to share additional information associated with the personnel action. Typically, such a response will be passed along and encourage employees to consider that other facts exist that justify the personnel action.

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### **Notes:**

***This information is intended only for the employees of your company. Please do not post it on a website that is accessible by the general public or by your company's clients.***

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